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Homophobic *How well do we understand the problem?* Bullying

Hardeep Aiden, Kate Marston & Tom Perry

November 2013

Homophobic Bullying

How well do we understand the problem?

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Homophobic Bullying

How well do we understand the problem?

Foreword

As I write, we are approaching the ten year anniversary of the repeal of Section 28 in England and Wales (18th November 2003), legislation which prohibited local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality' as a 'pretended family relationship'.

Although no-one was ever prosecuted under this law, the effect was to create a widespread culture of professional silence about sexuality in the classroom. In the decade since its repeal, there has clearly been more positive legislation and policy initiatives implemented focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) equality.

Nevertheless, the issues of prejudice and discrimination still remain, and much research has been concerned with the experiences of primarily LGB young people. Evidence also suggests that regardless of the repeal of Section 28, some schools and/or teachers are still unsure or lacking in confidence about including LGBT identities and relationships within their teaching.

Often schools focus their energies on anti-bullying policies and practices. Within this context, this publication provides a valuable synthesis of recent academic literature in the field. The authors highlight the continuance of homophobic bullying as an issue, as well as growing concerns about 'at risk' and 'victim' discourses, and acknowledge the diversity of experiences of homophobic bullying and young LGBT people's experiences more broadly.

They go on to offer suggestions for ways forward, based on the principles of recognition, prevention and response. This is a timely reminder of the role research can play in influencing support service provision and broader advocacy work. I would encourage researchers and service providers to engage with these debates and applaud the hard work that I know has gone into producing this report.



Eleanor Formby

Senior Research Fellow
Sheffield Hallam University

November 2013

Homophobic Bullying

How well do we understand the problem?

Authors

Hardeep Aiden is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Bristol and a researcher at a national disability charity. In 2011 he co-organised Pride After Prejudice: an ESRC-funded event exploring the issues affecting today's LGBT youth, including discrimination and bullying in schools. In 2012 he was commissioned by EACH to carry out a review of the literature on homophobic bullying. He is currently advising on a project seeking to co-produce a range of resources with young disabled people to help tackle cyberbullying.

Kate Marston is the Projects Coordinator at EACH. She graduated from the University of Sheffield with an MA in Educational Studies. At EACH, Kate's role involves coordinating the Actionline for young people experiencing homophobic or transphobic bullying, as well as managing the Reach project which is working with young people to co-create resources to challenge homophobic, sexist and cyberbullying. She has authored a number of reports for EACH including Cyberhomophobia and Bullying and spoken on the topic of homophobic bullying at conferences at the University of Cardiff, University of the West of England, Royal Geographical Society and Anti-Bullying Alliance.

Tom Perry is a graduate from the University of Birmingham, where he received a BA with Honours degree in International Relations. He joined EACH in 2012 as a Project Assistant on the Reach project where he helped facilitate and evaluate workshops with young people on prejudice-based bullying. Tom is now working as a Policy and Campaigns Officer for a leading UK HIV charity on projects related to HIV prevention and sex and relationships education.

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Homophobic Bullying

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Educational Action Challenging Homophobia

The award-winning charity for young people and adults affected by homophobia or transphobia. It is also a not-for-profit training agency for employers and organisations committed to realising an equal and safe working environment for all regardless of age, sex, ability, ethnicity, faith, gender identity or sexuality.

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A dynamic project of EACH which aims, by 2014, to create resources for both schools and youth settings to challenge homophobic, sexist and cyberbullying. To date EACH has worked with 3,250 young people across the West of England to co-create these resources. Up to now their voices have rarely been heard however our work demonstrates that many young people are engaged and empathise with the issues.

'Homophobic bullying: how well do we understand the problem?' builds upon the findings of our work with young people on the Reach project by examining a broad range of existing literature on the topic. In turn the findings of the report have informed the development of the Reach resource.

The Reach project is funded by the BIG Lottery.

<http://www.eachaction.org.uk/reach/>

Homophobic Bullying

How well do we understand the problem?

Executive summary

Homophobic bullying poses significant problems for the young people affected as well as for those working to tackle the problem. However, we cannot hope to develop effective, long-lasting solutions unless we comprehensively understand the issues involved. To this end, EACH commissioned this report in 2012 as a review of the existing literature concerning homophobic bullying. The review had four overlapping aims:

- To understand the nature and extent of homophobic bullying
- To describe the groups and individuals affected
- To explore the impact on those involved
- To recommend ways to tackle the problem

Our final report offers a more balanced and nuanced approach to understanding homophobic bullying in educational settings, which challenges many of the assumptions that have previously been taken for granted. These assumptions include:

- Individualising: we try to tackle particular incidents of bullying by looking at the characteristics of the ‘bullies’ and ‘victims’ involved, rather than the wider sociocultural factors.
- Essentialising: we focus on young people’s sexual orientation as a risk factor, because we assume that is what the bullies are targeting.
- Pathologising: we view young people, especially lesbian, gay or bisexual young people, as inherently ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk of being bullied’ and treat their experiences of bullying as inevitable.

Homophobic bullying does not persist only because bullies are targeting individuals with same-sex related orientations. It exists because many young people are living and studying in environments where negative attitudes towards, and stereotypes about, LGBT people are socially acceptable and where bullying based on these prejudices goes unchallenged.

While we tend to think of homophobic bullying in terms of 'homophobia', two of the concepts found in the academic literature, 'heterosexism' and 'heteronormativity', can offer new perspectives on homophobic bullying. There is overlap between these terms, but also significant differences. While homophobia describes negative attitudes towards LGB identities and the associated lifestyles, heterosexism focuses on the belief that heterosexual identities and the associated lifestyles are normal and anything else is inferior or less acceptable in some way.

Many of the beliefs around what is acceptable and normal is informed by gender and the way that certain behaviours, characteristics and qualities are culturally aligned with being a man or a woman. Expectations about how men and women should behave (and assumptions that everyone is either male or female, not transgender) intertwine with expectations around sexuality so that to be a 'proper man' or 'proper woman' one must be heterosexual and conform to certain gender norms. Where these ideas become commonplace or institutionalised, we find heteronormative environments.

Understanding gender norms, heterosexism and heteronormativity push us to look beyond individual incidents of bullying and explore the negativity that surrounds non-heterosexual identities and gender nonconformity in different social settings, including schools. Homophobic bullying does not exist in isolation from wider social and cultural norms – it is directly informed by them.

We also need to move beyond ideas of bullies and targets as discrete and homogenous groups. Some people who bully may become bullied themselves, while those targeted may use bullying as a form of retaliation, hence the term 'bully-victim'. Alternatively, a young person might be an onlooker in one incident, but a target or perpetrator in another. These categories are not fixed and we need to appreciate the transience of these labels if we are to fully grasp the nature of the problem.

Research conducted on both sides of the Atlantic tells us about the negative impact of bullying. For a lot of young people, bullying can have a negative impact on their health and well-being with an increased risk of depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. This is true of the bullies and bystanders too, not just the individuals targeted. For those who are unsure about their sexuality, homophobic bullying may discourage them from 'coming out' or pressure them to rescind the admission that they are not heterosexual. Although we have to be aware of the risks, we also need to be mindful not to pathologise young LGB people as a result. By this, we mean treating the experiences of LGB youth as disempowered and victimised or, more worryingly, presenting this experience as a natural and inevitable part of being LGB.

Looking at the other side of the coin we also need more research into the resources and strategies that enable young people to recover from bullying. Many young people are already effectively demonstrating the ability to cope with adversity. All too often, however, young people who experience homophobic bullying feel that they cannot cope. Resilience is not something that some young people have and others do not. Providing a range of resources and support to young people will help them to develop their own resilience. The focus should be on creating support networks, not a 'sink or swim' attitude.

Apart from bullies and targets, other people may be affected or involved in some way including teachers, parents, siblings and peers. In the case of school staff, members may not feel adequately prepared in terms of the training or resources needed to challenge homophobic behaviour and promote diversity and equality. Teachers may contribute to the abuse, for instance by condoning homophobic language, or by 'reinforcing and shaping young people's attitudes and possibly prejudices' (Tippett, Houlston and Smith 2012: 88). On the other hand, teachers themselves might be the targets of abuse and teaching unions such as the NASUWT have called for more research on targeted teachers. School leaders and governors also have a responsibility to help realise an inclusive and welcoming environment for all young people; one where homophobic attitudes are regarded as antisocial.

Parents and guardians can play a key role in reiterating messages taught in school but there is also a risk that these messages could be undermined. Young people should be taught about diversity and equality through the curriculum but it is vital that we create multiple opportunities to reinforce these ideas. Parents should be fully informed and consulted when working to challenge homophobia and promote LGBT equality. This will not only ensure they know what is going on and why but should help foster their support for such initiatives.

If the challenges posed by homophobic bullying are to be tackled successfully all stakeholders including families, community members, religious figures, politicians, charity professionals, educators and young people must work together to deal with the problem. Collaboration between all parties is vital and importantly young people must have ownership over solutions. Many practitioners have advocated a 'whole school' approach but anti-bullying strategies should not just start or stop at the school gates. Instead we advocate multiple-partnerships and collaborative initiatives based on three principles: recognition, prevention and response.

Background

Despite the growth of anti-bullying measures in UK schools, bullying is still a widespread problem. According to a national survey carried out for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in 2009, nearly half (46%) of children and young people had experienced bullying while at school, and a fifth (21%) said that they had been bullied outside of school (Chamberlain et al. 2010: 36-37). The worst affected are LGB and transgender students and young people with learning disabilities (EHRC 2011: 317).

Homophobic bullying is a significant problem that deserves serious attention from policymakers, educators, parents, youth workers, professionals in children's services, mental health practitioners, and voluntary sector workers. For the purpose of this report, we define homophobic bullying as repeated harassment or abusive behaviour characterised by negative attitudes towards those who identify as, or who are perceived to be LGB, and relationships which are associated with non-heterosexual kinships or affiliations. Anyone can be homophobically bullied but it is often directed towards people who identify as LGB, are perceived to be LGB or are associated with LGB people such as family or friends.

Under the New Labour governments, specific guidance for schools and authorities to tackle different forms of bullying including homophobic bullying appeared in web-based guidance and accompanying resources entitled Safe to Learn (DCSF 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), co-authored by several organisations including EACH. More recently, new advice has been issued by the Coalition government to replace Safe to Learn, with an emphasis on prioritising the elimination of prejudice-based bullying as a step towards eliminating discrimination under the new public sector Equality Duty (DfE 2011). The ten-page document demonstrates the government's awareness of cyberbullying as a problem and the need to include parents in anti-bullying policies but it does not offer detailed guidance on anti-bullying measures.

Outside of government guidance the past ten years has seen the development of a range of resources to challenge homophobic bullying. This includes Out of the Shadow: Guidance to Schools on the repeal of Section 28 by EACH; classroom-based materials from Stonewall such as the film FIT; a research project called No Outsiders which saw primary schools developing strategies to address LGB equality; the establishment of LGBT History Month in the UK by Schools Out; and Homophobia: Let's Tackle It, a resource by Show Racism the Red Card, which seeks to promote equality in sporting contexts. All of these resources have sought to raise awareness around homophobic bullying, schools responsibilities to address it and how to develop strategies for tackling the problem.

Given the growth of research in this area, EACH commissioned a review of recent academic, third sector and government literature relating to homophobic bullying in order to understand its nature and extent, describe the groups and individuals affected, explore the impact on those involved, and recommend ways to tackle the problem. This report summarises the key findings from the review and we hope that it serves as a valuable addition to existing literature on understanding and tackling bullying.

What do we mean by homophobic bullying?

Bullying is a form of harassment which is 'deliberately hurtful (including aggression), repeated often over a period of time [and] difficult for victims to defend themselves against' (DfES 2000: 9). Bullying becomes homophobic when it involves negative feelings or attitudes towards those who identify as, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB).

This definition probably fits in with many people's ideas about homophobic bullying and there is nothing wrong with it as such. The key issue is the way we view homophobic bullying in the first place. We tend to think about homophobic bullying in terms which fragment and categorise young people into roles such as 'the bully', 'the victim', the 'gay' child, the 'homophobic' child. However the way these roles intersect is often overlooked and wider socio-cultural factors become disconnected from the problem (Renold and Epstein, 2010). When discussing homophobic bullying some key pitfalls include individualising, essentialising and pathologising the problem.

Individualising

Practitioners may have developed a good understanding of the individual characteristics of perpetrators and targets of homophobic bullying but individuals' circumstances and social environments receive much less attention. We cannot find long-term solutions to homophobic bullying unless we acknowledge the wider social and cultural factors which reinforce prejudice (Ringrose 2008).

At the same time, labelling someone as a 'bully' or a 'victim' reinforces an unambiguous distinction between the perpetrator and the target but experiences of bullying are not so straightforward. Young people who are targeted by bullies might bully others as a result of their experience, or vice versa, and even bystanders can be affected by bullying.

Essentialising

Many people assume that young people are homophobically bullied because of their sexual orientation, to the point where sexual orientation is viewed as the sole risk factor in homophobic bullying (Ellis and High 2004; Ringrose 2008). However, homophobic bullying can impact on anyone regardless of sexual orientation. Young people are often targeted because they are perceived as being different in some way and these differences usually have more to do with gender.

Pathologising

Young people, especially LGB young people, are all too often viewed as inherently 'vulnerable' or 'at risk of being bullied', and their experiences of bullying may even be regarded as inevitable. Treating LGB young people as 'natural victims' not only places the blame for homophobic bullying on LGB young people themselves but also furthers the idea that LGB identities are undesirable and inferior to heterosexual identities (Formby 2013; Monk 2011). It can also hinder efforts at supporting young people to develop resilience.

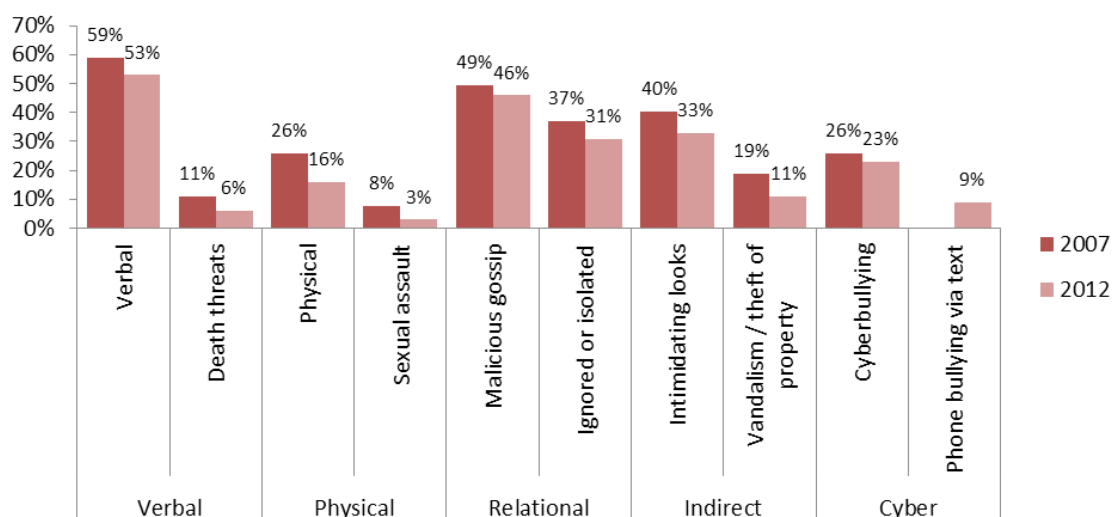
What forms does it take?

Direct forms of bullying can involve verbal or physical harassment while indirect forms of bullying may include relational bullying (e.g. ostracising people) or acts of vandalism. Research tells us that verbal abuse is the most common form of harassment but a single ‘incident’ may involve abusive behaviour in multiple, overlapping forms.

New technology, including smart phones and widespread internet access has transformed the bullying landscape. Not only does it allow direct and indirect forms of bullying to be perpetrated in new ways but it has also given rise to a distinct form of bullying in the shape of ‘cyberbullying’. Among other things, the bullies may be anonymous, the bullying can take place anytime and anywhere and the impact of the bullying is often greater in scope.

Across the literature the categorisation of homophobic bullying varies in breadth and depth, ranging from extreme repeated systematic violence to the pejorative use of the word ‘gay’. It is important to recognise that prejudice-based bullying does not refer to specific or singular acts but to the attitudes towards a particular identity or group that underlie abusive behaviour. These attitudes present themselves in many different forms: both direct and indirect. In addition, technological advances have transformed the bullying landscape with new tools such as smart phones and tablets which provide platforms for the direct and indirect targeting of young people 24 hours a day.

Figure 1. Prevalence of different types of homophobic bullying among all LGB pupils



Sources: Hunt and Jensen (2007), N=1145; Guasp (2012), N=1614

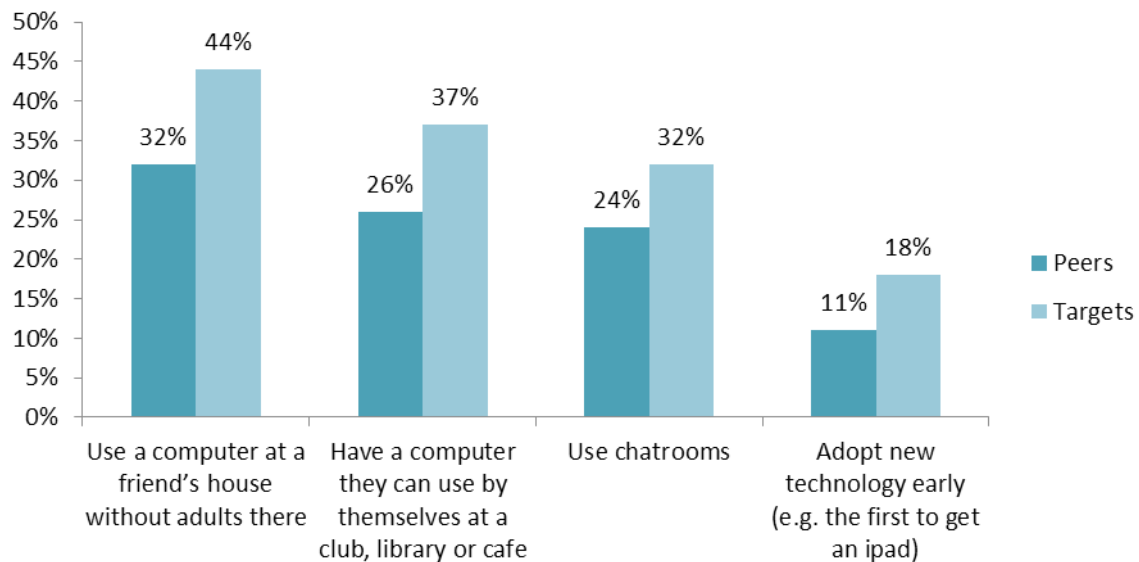
Note: Both studies were commissioned by Stonewall under the School Report series. The 2007 data has been recalculated as a percentage of all LGB pupils in line with the 2012 data.

The Stonewall School Reports (Hunt and Jensen 2007; Guasp 2012) suggest that the proportion of all LGB pupils experiencing homophobic bullying fell from 65% in 2007 to 55% in 2012 (see Figure 1). While this is encouraging, we cannot be certain if this reflects wider trends in British schools. To begin with, it is worth reiterating that homophobic bullying does not just affect LGB pupils and research which focuses solely on those who identify as LGB will always underestimate the prevalence and impact of homophobic bullying. Moreover, another study notes that of the few young people who did report homophobic bullying to their school only a minority actually revealed the nature of the incident(s) (Rivers and Cowie 2006). As a result, educators and practitioners may often know little about the types of bullying behaviour that young people are actually experiencing.

Both Stonewall's research (Guasp 2012) and Rivers and Noret's (2010) study indicate that homophobic cyberbullying is prevalent but neither provides an insight into the complexity of young people's experiences online. The results of the Reach Cybersurvey suggest that 18% of young people report being cyberbullied but this could be an underestimate of the prevalence of the problem for several reasons. For instance, cyberbullying often involves images or web-based incitement to hatred that children and young people may be embarrassed to show to adults making it difficult to estimate the real extent of the problem.

The Reach Cybersurvey also found that 875 out of 1,969 young people (aged 10-21 years) surveyed had seen homophobic insults and abuse happen to other people online, while 472 young people had personally received 'insults calling you gay' online (EACH and Youthworks Consulting 2012). However, only 160 of those surveyed actually identified as being homophobic bullied. Those who identified as being homophobic bullied were twice as likely to say they 'never' or did 'not really' follow e-safety advice and were less likely to say they received e-safety advice at the right time (EACH and Youthworks Consulting 2012: 2). Evidence from the Cybersurvey also suggests that the targets of homophobic bullying are more likely than their peers to use computers without adults nearby, to use chatrooms and to adopt new technology (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Access to cyberspace



Source: EACH and Youthworks Consulting (2012)

Continuing advances in technology and the role this technology plays in young people's lives mean we cannot talk about homophobic bullying without also discussing cyberbullying. The risks notwithstanding, we should also be aware of new opportunities to tackle the problem. For example, cyber-bullies are more likely to leave evidence in the form of electronic trails and targets can access anonymous support and guidance. However, this is immaterial if we cannot create spaces where young people feel comfortable and confident enough to report and seek support for homophobic bullying in the first place.

Why does homophobic bullying persist?

Homophobic bullying does not persist only because bullies are targeting individuals with LGB sexual orientations. It exists because many young people are living and studying in environments where negative attitudes towards, and stereotypes about, LGB and transgender people are socially acceptable and where bullying based on these prejudices goes unchallenged. While we tend to think of homophobic bullying in terms of 'homophobia', two of the concepts found in the academic literature, 'heterosexism' and 'heteronormativity', can offer new perspectives on homophobic bullying. In addition further attention should be paid to the role that gender norms play in reinforcing homophobic behaviour.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism focuses on the belief that heterosexual identities and the associated lifestyles are normal and coherent whilst non-heterosexual identities and the associated lifestyles are inferior and less acceptable. As a term it allows us to conceptualise social and cultural phenomena that preserve the attitudes and behaviours that favour heterosexuality over non-heterosexual orientations (see Robinson 2005; Chesir-Teran and Hughes 2009).

One example of heterosexist behaviour is the pejorative use of the word 'gay' amongst young people to describe something as dysfunctional, broken or wrong (e.g 'that's so gay'). This use of language does not necessarily constitute bullying as it is often used to describe situations and objects rather than harass individuals (McCormack 2012). However it does function to privilege heterosexual over LGB identities by making the latter 'synonymous with ineptitude, undesirability and isolation' (DePalma and Jennett 2010: 18). The pathologising narrative around homophobic bullying can privilege heterosexist attitudes as it reinforces the idea that non-heterosexual identities are inherently 'at risk'.

Gender

Many of the beliefs around what is acceptable and normal is informed by gender and the way that certain behaviours, characteristics and qualities are culturally aligned with being a man or a woman. Boys who identify with a masculine ideal or norm often define themselves in opposition to girls, feminine behaviour and gay/bisexual men, while girls tend to construct their femininity in opposition to boys, masculine behaviour and lesbian/bisexual women (Renold 2005: 63; ATL 2008). When we essentialise homophobic bullying as solely an issue of LGB sexual orientation we ignore the role that homophobia plays in policing every young person's expression of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Studies suggest that homophobic bullying is an expression of anxieties and fears aimed at those who do not conform to stereotypical expectations of masculine or feminine behaviour (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996; Mandel and Shakeshaft 2000; Renold 2002). This pressure to conform to masculine and feminine norms is evident as early on as primary school (Katz, Buchanan and McCoy 1999; Renold 2005; DePalma and Atkinson 2009). Where research has found decreasing incidents of homophobia it has also found an expansion in the gendered behaviours available to young people (McCormack 2012). Therefore the link between homophobia, heterosexism and gender norms should not be overlooked.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity refers to environments where heterosexist and gender normative ideas become institutionalised. Schools can reinforce heterosexist attitudes by rendering non-heterosexual identities invisible: for example by failing to discuss LGBT matters in a broad range of curriculum subjects. Whilst policies may be in place to address homophobic bullying they rarely challenge the 'centrality and dominance of normative heterosexuality' (Epstein et al. 2003: 149). By individualising homophobic bullying as a problem we often ignore the important role that structural change can make in preventing and challenging homophobic attitudes.

Understanding gender norms, heterosexism and heteronormativity push us to look beyond individual incidents of bullying and explore the negativity that surrounds non-heterosexual identities and gender nonconformity in different social settings, including schools. Homophobic bullying does not exist in isolation to wider social and cultural norms – it is directly informed by them.

Even where anti-bullying policies are in place and individual incidents are reported and dealt with educational settings will struggle to challenge homophobic bullying effectively if underlying heterosexist attitudes go unchallenged through preventative measures. The repeal of Section 28 in 2003 was a watershed moment not only in terms of equalities legislation but also as a barrier to social change as the legislation encouraged institutionalised heteronormativity to flourish. Despite the fact that the legislation had no direct legal effect on schools' policies, 'Section 28 served to undermine the confidence of those professionals who sought, and had responsibilities, to provide appropriate advice and support to all young people and colleagues' (Charlesworth 2004: 5). Schools are now in a better position to tackle homophobic bullying holistically for example by making their curricula more inclusive. Change can only be brought about, however, through collective efforts.

What do we know about the targets and bullies?

The complexity of homophobic bullying does not just apply to social contexts. Although we stress the need to look at the bigger picture, we must not forget that we are working with individuals with individual needs and expectations. One-size-fits-all solutions will not always work, and that is where personalised approaches come into their own. By reducing homophobic bullying solely to an issue of sexual orientation we forget how the experience of homophobia intersects with other aspects of young people's identity including their gender, disability, ethnicity, religion and so on.

Although LGB young people are often targeted for homophobic bullying, anyone can be homophobically bullied, regardless of their sexual orientation. In fact many young people are targeted because they do not conform to gender norms (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996). Understanding the role that gender norms play in homophobic bullying allows us to see why some young people are targeted over others, as well as how bullying experiences can differ between boys and girls.

Studies have shown that boys are often aggressors, whereas girls are associated with relational bullying (Rivers and Cowie 2006; Hunt and Jensen 2007; Rivers and Noret 2010; Benton 2011). This can render girls' experiences of bullying as invisible as it is less easy to detect by adults and young people alike. However, in acknowledging the gendered nature of homophobic bullying we must be careful not to create new stereotypes. Girls and boys can engage in a range of bullying behaviours and these incidents should be dealt with equally. For example we should be wary not to exceptionalise girls who engage in physical bullying nor dismiss this behaviour amongst male peers as 'boys will be boys' (Ringrose 2012; Ofsted 2012: 21). To do so would only serve to reinforce the gender norms that can underlie homophobic bullying.

Age is another factor that may be overlooked. Incidents of homophobic bullying tend to decrease with age but this is not necessarily true for cyberbullying. Also, it is important that anti-homophobic bullying interventions are introduced at an early age when ideas and expectations around gender begin to form (Renold 2005; DePalma and Atkinson 2009). But for these interventions to work, primary school staff need to have the training and confidence to broach these issues in an age-appropriate way.

We also need to move beyond ideas of bullies and targets as discrete and homogenous groups. Some people who bully may become bullied themselves while those targeted may use bullying as a form of retaliation hence the term 'bully-victim'. Alternatively, a young person might be an onlooker in one incident but a target or perpetrator in another. These categories are not fixed and we need to appreciate the transience of these labels if we are to fully grasp the nature of the problem.

Research conducted on both sides of the Atlantic tells us about the negative impact of bullying. For a lot of young people, bullying can have a negative impact on their health and well-being with an increased risk of depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. This is true of the bullies and bystanders too, not just the individuals targeted. For those who are unsure about their sexuality, homophobic bullying may discourage them from 'coming out', or pressure them into 'going back in'. Although we have to be aware of the risks we also need to be mindful not to pathologise young LGB people as a result. By this we mean painting an inherently negative picture of LGB youth as disempowered and victimised or, more worryingly, presenting these characteristics as natural and inevitable.

Looking at the other side of the coin, we also need more research into the resources and strategies that enable young people to cope with bullying. Resilience should not be left up to individuals to work out for themselves. Providing a range of resources and support to young people will help them to develop their own resilience. The focus should be on creating support networks: not a 'sink or swim' attitude.

Who else is involved?

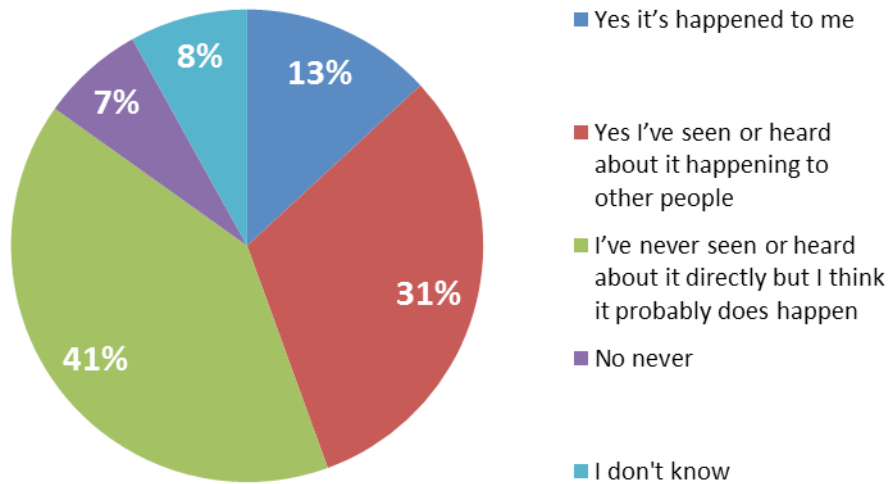
Apart from bullies and targets, other people may be affected or involved in some way including teachers, parents, siblings and peers. In the case of school staff, members may not feel adequately prepared in terms of the training or resources needed to challenge homophobic behaviour and promote diversity and equality. Teachers may contribute to the abuse for instance by condoning homophobic language or by 'reinforcing and shaping young people's attitudes and possibly prejudices' (Tippett, Houlston and Smith 2012: 88). On the other hand, teachers themselves might be the targets of abuse and NASUWT (2011) calls for more research on targeted teachers. School leaders and governors also have a responsibility to help realise an inclusive and welcoming environment for all young people: one where homophobic attitudes are regarded as antisocial.

Parents and guardians can play a key role in reiterating messages taught in school but there is also a risk that these messages could be undermined. Young people should be taught about diversity and equality through the curriculum but it is vital that we create multiple opportunities to reinforce these ideas.

Bullying is not just about bullies and their targets: young people assumed to be 'bystanders' can also be involved in bullying. Bystanders may instigate, encourage or accept bullying but they also have the power to intervene or get help for those targeted (Salmivalli 2010). Understanding the roles that bystanders can play can help teachers and practitioners design appropriate interventions.

The results of the Reach Cybersurvey 2012 showed that out of 1,969 respondents, almost half (44.4%) had witnessed some homophobic abuse, insults or aggression happening to others (EACH and Youthworks Consulting, 2012). Similarly, a smaller-scale study conducted by Formby (2011) suggests that while 13% of students have experienced homophobic or transphobic bullying nearly a third (31%) have seen or heard about it happening to other people (see Figure 3). The numbers alone suggest that we cannot ignore the roles of bystanders.

Figure 3. Homophobic or transphobic bullying can happen to young people who may or may not be gay or trans. Do you think this ever happens at your school?



Source: Formby (2011)

The impact of bullying on bystanders has received much less attention than the impact on targets or bullies. However, a study of over 500 young people in the US who had witnessed bullying behaviour found that the bystanders were significantly distressed by these experiences (Janson et al. 2009). Negative effects were also noted by Rivers (2011) in his study. Given that bystanders are likely to outnumber bullies and targets these findings should not be taken lightly.

How can we tackle the problem?

If the challenge posed by homophobic bullying is to be tackled successfully, all stakeholders – including families, community members, religious figures, politicians, charity professionals, educators and young people – must work together to deal with the problem. Collaboration between all parties is vital and importantly young people must have ownership over solutions. Many practitioners have advocated a ‘whole school’ approach, which can be described as,

Taking action at various levels, including: the development of a positive school ethos; regular reviews of anti-bullying policies and strategies (including the relationship of bullying to racial and sexual harassment, and homophobic abuse); curriculum development; support and training for teachers; environmental design; and working in partnership with parents (Oliver and Candappa 2003: 90).

But anti-bullying strategies should not just start or stop at the school gates. Instead, we advocate multiple partnerships and collaborative initiatives based on three principles: recognition, prevention and response.

Recognition

We cannot prevent every incident of bullying from happening and that is where educational settings need robust frameworks for recognising and understanding homophobic bullying when it occurs. The literature emphasises that in certain environments the targets of homophobic bullying may not feel comfortable or confident in telling someone about it, which could disguise the extent of homophobic bullying. Recognition requires robust monitoring and recording procedures when bullying does occur but it also requires consultation with pupils, teachers, parents and other key stakeholders to understand what attitudes are around homophobia and how it is dealt with in a school or youth setting. Monitoring and consultation should include a stringent appreciation of demographic factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, disability, religion and ethnicity and, more importantly, how these factors interact within any given environment. Recognising these factors and their mutual interaction is key to understanding homophobic bullying and where to direct anti-bullying resources.

Prevention

Prevention should be the focus of any approach to tackling homophobic bullying. It involves creating an inclusive school ethos across all areas including leadership, policy, training, curriculum opportunities and specific initiatives. This can be referred to as a ‘whole-school’ approach. As part of the Equality Duty set out under the Equality Act

2010, schools are now expected to be proactive in their approach to facilitating equality among all pupils. For example, the new Positive Action provisions allow schools to promote specific initiatives that cater to the specific needs of a particular group without being accused of excluding those who do not identify within that group.

Response

At the same time, schools must demonstrate a clear and organised response to homophobic bullying when it does occur. The literature identifies that an effective response to homophobic bullying must include key procedures for challenging homophobic attitudes (including homophobic language use); a robust and efficient reporting system where young people feel confident and comfortable in reporting incidents; an effective support system in place which recognises the needs of those who are targeted homophobically; a genuine and workable dialogue with parents and guardians, (including those who are targeted themselves); a system which holds perpetrators to account; and finally a robust and efficient system to monitor progress and setbacks.

Recommendations

- Challenge the misconception that homophobic bullying is just an LGB issue. Although LGB young people are disproportionately affected by homophobic bullying, research continues to underestimate the extent of the problem by focusing on 'homophobia' rather than the heteronormativity that fuels homophobic and sexist prejudices and behaviour.
- Work in partnership with other stakeholders, especially young people. Bullying is best tackled through a 'whole school' approach, if not a 'whole community' approach and building partnerships can allow resources and expertise to be shared as well as fostering a shared sense of ownership.
- Invest in appropriate training and resources for all stakeholders. These should be continually updated and checked against the ever-changing environment to ensure that they are still relevant, especially for phenomena such as cyberbullying.
- Give equal weight to recognition, prevention and response. Preventative and responsive measures should complement each other but there should be a clear focus on tackling the underlying cultural and societal prejudices, namely heteronormativity.
- Commission further research to investigate under-researched areas including: demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disability, the characteristics of and effects of bullying on perpetrators and bystanders; the on-going legacy of Section 28 and the sociocultural factors that underpin homophobic bullying.

Glossary

Cyberbullying

The deliberate act of harassing another individual using the Internet, mobile phones and other interactive technologies.

Cybersurvey

Designed by Youthworks, the Cybersurvey is an online survey exploring young people's experiences of cyberbullying and the e-safety they have been taught.

A bespoke survey was carried out as part of EACH's Reach Project to investigate homophobic bullying online.

EHRC

Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Gender conformity

The belief that people's gender should conform to their sex (i.e. that men should behave in a masculine way, females in a feminine way) which reinforces gender stereotypes and negative attitudes toward people who do not conform.

Heteronormativity

The sociocultural conditions that allow heterosexist and/or homophobic attitudes to exist.

Heterosexism

The belief that heterosexuality is normal and the norm.

Homophobia

A range of negative attitudes and feelings towards LGB people.

Prejudice based bullying - sometimes referred to as identity-based bullying: any form of bullying related to the unique characteristics that are part of a person's identity such as their race, religion, sexual orientation or physical appearance.

LGB

Lesbian, gay or bisexual.

LGBT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Transphobia

A range of negative attitudes and feelings towards transgender people.

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Homophobic Bullying

How well do we understand the problem?

In 2012 Educational Action Challenging Homophobia (EACH) commissioned a comprehensive review of recent academic, third sector and government literature around homophobic bullying. Some of the key findings of that review are summarised in this report. Its aims are to challenge several taken-for-granted assumptions around homophobic bullying and to develop an evidence-based understanding of the:

- nature and extent of homophobic bullying
- groups and individuals affected
- impact on those involved
- measures available to tackle the problem

This report calls for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to adopt a broader understanding of homophobic bullying and its impact on young people today. It is testament to the valuable role that research can play in influencing support services and it calls for collaborative approaches to challenge homophobia based on three simple principles: recognition, prevention and response.

Hardeep Aiden, Kate Marston and Tom Perry